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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 TEL AVIV 001866

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT](#)  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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- [1](#)1. Mideast
- [1](#)2. Blair in Libya

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Key stories in the media:  
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Yediot reported that Thursday in Washington, the date of PM Sharon's visit to the U.S. was set as April 14.

Jerusalem Post (lead story) and Ha'aretz reported that Sharon's bureau chief Dov Weisglass will return today from intensive discussions in Washington about Sharon's disengagement plan, but without any final U.S. approval of the plan. Ha'aretz quoted government sources as saying that "Israel did not get the full political support" it sought from the U.S. Hatzofe reported that in a leaflet distributed among Likud members, FM Silvan Shalom criticized the disengagement plan, which he says will increase Israeli-Palestinian friction.

Ha'aretz reported that Israeli defense experts have concluded in the last two days that despite the intention of Hamas and other groups to exert revenge for Israel's assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, there would be no dramatic change in the number or intensity of terrorist attacks. Maariv reported that associates of PA Chairman Yasser Arafat have asked the CIA to protect him from Israeli assassination attempts. The newspaper reported that the U.S. declined to pledge that Israel will not assassinate him. Ha'aretz succinctly mentioned similar reports.

Leading media reported that Thursday the U.S. vetoed a new UN Security Council resolution draft condemning Israel for the killing of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, calling the measure "one-sided" and saying it ignored the group's bloody record of terrorism. Three countries abstained -- Germany, the UK and Romania. Israel Radio reported that Russia expressed disappointment over the U.S. veto.

Leading media (Yediot's lead story) reported that last night the IDF killed three Palestinian terrorists who tried to infiltrate the Gush Katif (Gaza Strip) settlement of Tel Katifa (Maariv: a military outpost in the settlement). They had landed from the Mediterranean. Israel Radio cited the Israel Navy's surprise over its inability to prevent the landing. Leading media also reported that a terrorist attack was thwarted near Emmanuel in the West Bank, and that three Israelis were lightly wounded in a stone-throwing incident.

Citing Reuters, Ha'aretz reported that after strongly criticizing Israel for Yassin's killing, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Thursday that Egypt would continue efforts to arrange a meeting between Sharon and Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala).

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post quoted Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan as saying in an interview with the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet Thursday that Yassin's assassination constituted "terrorism," and that he could cancel a proposed trip to Jerusalem next month. Jerusalem Post reported that sources in Jerusalem downplayed remarks by Erdogan ("Mideast peace has suffered a serious wound in this incident. There is no road map left.... I don't find such an assassination humane."), saying that -- if the quotes are accurate -- Israel regrets the remarks. Maariv reported that an

agricultural delegation of Israeli women participating in a Danish-sponsored project in Egypt had to leave Cairo because of security concerns.

The media reported that Husam Abdu, the would-be suicide bomber apprehended Wednesday near Nablus, is not 14, but 16-and-a-half years old. Ha'aretz reported that military law in the territories does not consider him a minor and that the army is considering prosecuting him. All media cited the surprise and indignation of his family that terrorist groups used him. However, Hatzofe quoted his mother as saying that she would have approved of his act had he been 18.

Yediot reported that following Yassin's killing, CNN forbade talk show host Larry King, a "high-priority Jewish-American target," from visiting Israel. All media reported that Thailand told its citizens in Gush Katif to leave the bloc of settlements. Yediot reported that the Philippine government, which will send a high-ranking military delegation to Israel, is considering evacuating its foreign worker nationals from the country.

Leading media reported that elements in the defense establishment have warned that Hamas and other Palestinian groups intend to assassinate Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger, as well as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and Rabbi Kadoorie, in retaliation for the killing of Yassin.

Yediot reported that the special Knesset commission investigating the weaknesses of Israel's intelligence branches at the time of the Iraq War advocates tidying up those branches, particularly IDF Intelligence.

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**I. Mideast:**  
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Summary:  
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Senior op-ed writer Uzi Benziman commented in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "The assassination of Yassin showed how Ariel Sharon is capable of undermining the disengagement plan to which he is ostensibly committed."

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Raising the level of personal strikes to the political leadership is a serious mistake, which was meant to serve the Prime Minister's objective in his party."

Ha'aretz editorialized: "The [Israeli] public will not accept another empty political promise that does move beyond the drawing board."

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "This week's killing ... only intensified an already strong suspicion that Sharon's moves are not part of a broad-based and long-term plan, but a series of shots from the hip."

Regional correspondent Ronni Shaked wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "One should not ignore the courage demonstrated by those [70 prominent Palestinians] who initiated the public statement."

Block Quotes:  
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**I. "Shaken to the Core"**

Senior op-ed writer Uzi Benziman commented in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (March 26): "When the Israeli reaction to the assassination of Yassin is anxiety over what lies in store and dense fortifications, it's not so easy to be convinced that the assassination is contributing to state security.... The assassination of Yassin showed how Ariel Sharon is capable of undermining the disengagement plan to which he is ostensibly committed. He explained the assassination as arising from the need to paralyze Hamas's ability to sow terror, and to enable the IDF to leave the Gaza Strip without leaving behind conditions that would facilitate a continuation of terrorist attacks. But at the same time, the action was also volatile enough to derail the unilateral withdrawal plan -- since the killing of Yassin could easily spawn a cycle of actions and reactions that would create a situation, or the semblance of one, that would compel the IDF to remain in Gaza."

**II. "Why Now?"**

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (March 26): "For a split second the danger had arisen that a tiny speck of sanity had spread over Israel's territory.... Palestinian terrorism continued with the horrendous Ashdod Port murders and the cruel dispatching of children who would blow up next to Israelis, which spawned proper IDF responses in Nablus and Gaza. But something was in the air. There was talk of an arrangement, of a mini-peace. Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, Shaul Mofaz and Silvan Shalom immediately realized the gravity of the situation and brought back the enmity of old.... It is not that pinpoint assassinations are wrong. But they should be limited to the professional level [i.e. those executing attacks]. The killing of the 'Engineer' [ Hamas bomb-maker Yihie Ayash] in 1996 was justified, although it was followed by a wave of bus bombings. Raising the level of personal strikes to the political leadership is a serious mistake, which was meant to serve the Prime Minister's objective in his party."

### III. "How Serious is Sharon?"

Ha'aretz editorialized (March 26): " If Sharon's decision rests on security considerations, as he has made it clear, every additional day the IDF remains in the Strip is superfluous. One should remember that Sharon has not made the disengagement from the Strip contingent on the receipt of U.S. aid or approval, therefore, there is no need to wait for the U.S. position to implement the withdrawal.... [Besides,] on Wednesday, Sharon voted in favor of a bill that, if passed into law, would require a majority of 61 votes in the Knesset to evacuate settlements in the territories. Although one could see Sharon's vote as an expression of self-confidence that shows he believes he will be able to overcome constraints of the law, it is impossible not to see his vote as adopting a political constraint, albeit a symbolic one.... It is difficult to assess the disorder that may ensue if it emerges that the plan will not be put into practice due to various constraints, from home or abroad. The fact that the plan is unilateral -- a respectable constraint in itself -- cannot allow Sharon to hang its non-implementation on external (i.e. American or Palestinian), political or bureaucratic factors. The public will not accept another empty political promise that does move beyond the drawing board."

### IV. "Wanted: a Plan"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (March 26): "Say what you want about Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he sure knows how to change the subject. When it seemed he was about to be indicted, he dropped the bombshell of a unilateral dismantling of settlements in Gaza. Then, just as that plan was running into increasing resistance within his own party, he drops a literal bombshell on Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin. Not that we are suggesting the Prime Minister has consciously engineered these diversions, but the fact is that this week's killing has shifted attention from the broader picture, which is not about this or that resident of the Gaza Strip, but about the Strip itself.... This week's killing, having come as an isolated shot followed by nothing other than deep entrenchment in expectation of retaliatory response, only intensified an already strong suspicion that Sharon's moves are not part of a broad-based and long-term plan, but a series of shots from the hip. The situation, not to mention history, demands a lot more than that."

### IV. "Finally: Soul Searching"

Regional correspondent Ronni Shaked wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 26): "Finally, after three-and-a-half years of continuous terror, male and female suicide bombers, and the use of children as human bombs, the Palestinians are beginning to do some soul-searching. The problem is that the initiative by 70 Palestinian public figures, who Thursday called on the Palestinians to stop the terror and go for a popular Intifada, came too late.... It is also too bad that this initiative came after the Palestinian street is already full of hatred.... It is also too bad that the petition does not mention the moral value of the cessation of the killing: the signatories to the public statement call on their people to stop the terror in order not to give Sharon reasons to continue the fighting, and not in order to maintain the value of a human being as such. Nonetheless, one should not ignore the courage demonstrated by those who initiated the public statement.... There is no doubt that one should welcome

this initiative and encourage the signers to expand their number, to address their people directly and tell them unhesitatingly: enough of this terror. The soul of the simple person on the street is sick of the roadblocks, the suffering, the distress and the terror. It is reasonable to assume that the silent majority is prepared to accept the new initiative. The question is whether the terror organizations and the leaders of the gangs will agree to lay down their arms. The way reality looks today, that seems really far away."

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12. Blair in Libya:  
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Summary:  
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Researcher in strategic affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center Dr. Shmuel Bar wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 26): "In actual fact, the Blair-Qadhafi meeting serves the interest of both leaders, and is the direct outcome of the American ultimatum against the 'Axis of Evil' countries."

Block Quotes:  
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"An Alliance of Interests"

Researcher in strategic affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center Dr. Shmuel Bar wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 26): "In actual fact, the Blair-Qadhafi meeting serves the interest of both leaders, and is the direct outcome of the American ultimatum against the 'Axis of Evil' countries. Qadhafi may have been considered the craziest of Arab leaders, but he clearly knows about rewards and punishments. When he understood that his involvement in terrorist attacks had gone overboard, he renounced terror.... He is demonstrating a perfectly pragmatic behavior. Consequently, Thursday's meeting constituted the first step toward the renewed blossoming of the Libyan economy.... But Tony Blair, too, had an interest in this meeting. He is currently under domestic crossfire because of the British army's involvement in Iraq. By being the first Western leader who extended his hands to Qadhafi, Blair wished to prove to his adversaries -- and to the numerous Muslim voters in Britain -- that he can not only be a fighter, but also a friend when facing the Arab world."

KURTZER